

LIFE¹

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THE sun was shining in the dirty street. Old women with shapeless bodies waddled along on their way to market.

Bearded old men who looked like the fathers of Jerusalem walked flatfooted, nodding back and forth.

"The tread of the processional surviving in Halsted Street," thought Moisse, the young dramatist who was moving with the crowd.

Children sprawled in the refuse-laden alleys. One of them ragged and clotted with dirt stood half-dressed on the curbing and urinated into the street.

Wagons rumbled, filled with fruits and iron and rags and vegetables.

Human voices babbled above the noises of the traffic. Moisse watched the lively scene.

"Every day it's the same," he thought; "the same smells, the same noise and people swarming over the pavements. I am the only one in the street whose soul is awake. There's a pretty girl looking at me. She suspects the condition of my soul. Her fingers are dirty. Why does n't she buy different shoes? She thinks I am lost. In five years she will be fat. In ten years she will waddle with a shawl over her head."

The young dramatist smiled.

"Good God," he thought, "where do they come from? Where are they going? No place to no place. But al-

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ways moving, shuffling, waddling, crying out. The sun shines on them. The rain pours on them. It burns. It freezes. To-day they are bright with color. To-morrow they are gray with gloom. But they are always the same, always in motion."

The young dramatist stopped on the corner and looking around him spied a figure sitting on the sidewalk, leaning against the wall of a building.

The figure was an old man.

He had a long white beard.

He had his legs tucked under him and an upturned tattered hat rested in his lap.

His thin face was raised and the sun beat down on it, but his eyes were closed.

"Asleep," mused Moisse.

He moved closer to him.

The man's head was covered with long silky white hair that hung down to his neck and hid his ears. It was uncombed. His face in the sun looked like the face of an ascetic, thin, finely veined.

He had a long nose and almost colorless lips and the skin on his cheeks was white. It was drawn tight over his bones, leaving few wrinkles.

An expression of peace rested over him — peace and detachment. Of the noise and babble he heard nothing. His eyes were closed to the crowded frantic street.

He sat, his head back, his face bathed in the sun, smileless and dreaming.

"A beggar," thought Moisse, "asleep, oblivious. Dead. All day he sits in the sun like a saint, immobile. Like one of the old Alexandrian ascetics, like a delicately carved image. He is awake in himself but dead to others. The waves cannot touch him. His thoughts, oh to know his thoughts and his dreams?"

Suddenly the eyes of the young dramatist widened. He was looking at the beggar's long hair that hung to his neck.

"It's moving," he whispered half aloud. He came

closer and stood over the old man and gazed intently at the top of his head.

The hair was swaying faintly, each separate fiber moving alone. . . .

It shifted, rose imperceptibly and fell. It quivered and glided. . . .

"Lice," murmured Moisse.

He watched.

Silent and asleep the old man sat with his thin face to the sun and his hair moved.

Vermin swarmed through it, creeping, crawling, tiny and infinitesimal.

Every strand was palpitating, shuddering under their mysterious energy.

At first Moisse could hardly make them out, but his eyes gradually grew accustomed to the sight. And as he watched he saw the hair swell like waves riding over the water, saw it drop and flutter, coil and uncoil of its own accord.

Vermin raised it up, pulled it out, streaming up and down tirelessly in vast armies.

They crawled furiously like dust specks blown thick through the white beard.

They streamed and shifted and were never still.

They moved in and out, from no place to no place, but always moving, frantic and frenzied.

An old woman passed and with a shake of her head dropped two pennies into the upturned hat. Moisse hardly saw her. He saw only the palpitating swarms that were now facing, easily visible, through the gray white hair.

Some ventured down over the white ascetic face, crawling in every direction, traveling around the lips and over the closed eyes, emerging suddenly in thick streams from behind the covered ears and losing themselves under the ever moving beard.

And Moisse, his senses strained, thought he heard a noise — a faint crunching noise.

He listened.

The noise seemed to grow louder. He began to itch but he remained bending over the head. He could hear them, like a faraway murmur, a purring, uncertain sound.

"They're shouting and groaning, crying out, weeping and laughing," he mused. "It is life . . . life."

He looked up and down the crowded burning street with its frantic crowd, and smiled.

"Life," he repeated. . . .

He walked away. Before him floated the hair of the beggar moving as if stirred by a slow wind, and he itched.

"But who was the old man?" he thought.

A young woman, plump and smiling, jostled him. He felt her soft hip pressing against him for a moment.

A child running barefoot through the street brushed against his legs. He felt its sticky fingers seize him for an instant and then the child was gone. On he walked.

Three young men confronted him for a second time. He passed between two of them, squeezed by their shoulders.

A shapeless old woman bumped him with her back as she shuffled past.

Two children dodged in and out screaming and seized his arm to turn on.

The young dramatist stopped and remained standing still, looking about him.

Then he laughed.

"Life," he murmured again; and

"I am the old man," he added, "I . . . I . . ."